

# The Recognition Game

## Soviet Russia Against the West

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### ABSTRACT

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The problem with traditional explanations of relations between states is that they focus on matters of interests and pay insufficient attention to matters of identities. This article seeks to improve on this situation by providing a formal discussion of the role of recognition. World politics is best described as a recognition game rather than as a prisoner's dilemma. To prove the applicability of this argument, an analysis is made of the relations that obtained between Soviet Russia and the West. From the perspective of the alternative, identity-based, model, a number of the most important events of the twentieth century are explained in quite a new fashion.

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As a country on the periphery of the European continent, Russia has always had a troubled relationship with the countries of the European core. Already when Sigmund von Herberstein, the envoy of the Habsburg emperor, visited Moscovy in 1526 there was an obvious sense of insecurity on the part of the tsar. For the occasion, tsar Basil III Ivanovich had herded together a large number of people in his castle. No doubt, as von Herberstein concluded, 'so that foreigners may note the size of the crowd and the mightiness of its lord' (Shennan, 1974: 13). At the same time, the presence of 'such great potentates in the persons of their respected ambassadors' was designed to show the tsar's own vassals 'the respect in which their master is held' in the rest of the world.

The insecurity of tsar Basil Ivanovich had structural rather than psychological causes. In the Renaissance, a European system of states had begun to be formed. The world had come to be understood as a stage on which princes were acting and inter-acting with each other (Bozeman, 1960: 480-3; Ringmar, 1996a). The question was only who had the right to participate in this performance and which role each state was to play. This is the origin of Russia's insecurity. Compared to proper European nations, Russia would always come up short. Europe was the centre of civilization and culture, and Russia was backward, its people primitive and its rulers hopelessly





uncouth. Naturally, such conclusions undermined the position of the tsar in relation to other Renaissance princes and also in relation to his own subjects. In a rather desperate attempt to shore up his position, Basil III Ivanovich sought the presence of respected foreigners in order to impress his subjects, and the presence of his subjects in order to impress his foreign visitors.

Contemporary scholars of international relations are constitutionally unable to understand concerns such as these. According to the most influential — realist — analysis, the only standard that matters in world politics is that by which power is measured (Waltz, 1979/1986: 27–130). A state's position in the world is ultimately determined by the military capability it can muster, and, by implication, by the economic and technological foundation that makes a certain military capability possible. The anarchical structure of world politics has a strong socializing effect, and states are forced to mimic the behaviour of each other if they are to survive.

As the Russian example shows, however, socialization in international politics can operate on many different levels and not just security concerns make states copy each other. Not only physical, but also social survival is at stake. The squalor of a prince's court can give rise to a sense of inferiority and the spirituality of a people can give rise to a sense of superiority. These feelings, in turn, influence the way in which foreign policy is made. A country that considers itself inferior to others may try to catch up, either by peaceful means — like Japan after 1868 — or by military means — like Japan after 1931. A country which considers itself superior may seek to dominate others, be it militarily — like France after 1799 — or peacefully — like the United States after 1945.

On an intuitive level it is easy to agree that factors like these are important to a study of world politics, yet it is far from clear how to incorporate them into a scientific account. The theoretical aim of this article is to give these intuitions a more precise analytical content. Indeed the aim is to highlight an alternative, non-rationalist, interpretation of the fundamental logic of world politics. According to this logic, states not only pursue their 'national interest', but also — and before anything else — they seek to establish identities for themselves. In fact, questions regarding a state's identity must always be more fundamental than questions regarding its interests (Ringmar, 1996a). The empirical aim of this article is to apply this analytical framework to the relations that obtained between Soviet Russia and the West in the twentieth century. When seen from this alternative point of view, many of the most familiar events of recent history will receive quite a different interpretation.

### **Fighting for Interests, Fighting for Identities**

According to realist scholars, questions of war and peace must ultimately be answered by reference to the nature of the international system. The structure of world politics is decentralized and anarchic, they argue, and under such circumstances each state is forced to fend for itself. Yet, since each



state in seeking its own security increases the insecurity of other states, the inevitable result is hostility, arms races and threats of war. As long as world politics lacks a common power that can regulate common affairs, conflicts are likely to continue.

This description of world politics has often been compared to Thomas Hobbes’s description of life in the state of nature. In this imaginary condition before the emergence of the state, man had been engaged in a restless quest for the satisfaction of his desires. Since power was required for this pursuit to be successful, the restlessness of the desires corresponded to a ‘perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death’ (Hobbes, 1651/1968: 161). Not surprisingly, one man’s search for satisfaction came into conflict with another man’s, and since each man had the means to kill each other man, war — a *bellum omnium contra omnes* — was the inevitable result (Hobbes, 1651/1968: 184–6).

In more formal terms, the logic of this interaction can be illustrated with the help of a prisoner’s dilemma game, a situation of strategic interaction between two players in which the collectively most beneficial outcome differs from the outcome that is most beneficial to each individual participant. Mutual cooperation is preferable over mutual defection, but peace leads to war since each player is tempted by unilateral gains and threatened by unilateral losses (Matrix 1 shows the outcome from the point of view of player A).

The applicability of the state-of-nature model to world politics may be questioned on a number of grounds. It may, for example, be questioned as an empirical description. Perhaps states do not primarily seek their own survival; perhaps they look for many other goals besides power; or perhaps they have more interests in common than is generally assumed. If this is the case, world politics may not best be described as a Hobbesian state of nature, and states may not actually be playing prisoner’s dilemmas, but instead some more benign form of coordination games (Brams, 1985).

Even if we redefine the logic of world politics in some such terms, however, we are still assuming that it is the quest for pay-offs that motivates

MATRIX 1  
The Prisoner’s Dilemma Game

<i>A/B</i>	cooperation	defection
cooperation	peace	unilateral losses
defection	unilateral gains	war



state action. It is assumed that states seek to obtain objects that give them utility, pleasure or profit. Yet this assumption can itself be questioned. That is, we may ask not which pay-offs accrue to which actors, but instead whether the search for pay-offs really is what motivates the players to take part in the game in the first place. Or, put more starkly and in the affirmative: games are not primarily played for utilitarian reasons, and while people often act in their interests, this class of actions does not exhaust the reasons why people act.

In order to support this contention it is important to note that interests need to be defined in order to come to exist. Interests are nothing in themselves and only something in connection with a someone *for whom* they are interests. It follows, as a point of logic, that questions regarding interests can only begin to be discussed once questions regarding identities have been settled, at least in a preliminary fashion. It is only once we know who we are that we can know what we want. If this point is accepted, a theory of rational action will always come to presuppose a theory of how identities are created, established and maintained.

In his own way, Hobbes did in fact address this issue (Pizzorno, 1991). Each person in the state of nature, he argued, has a right to self-preservation and it is this right that is to be transferred to the state in order to be secured. Yet since the preservation of the self was a right that existed already in the state of nature, it follows that selves, for Hobbes, must have existed already before men entered into interaction with each other. The self was given by nature and formed prior to, and outside of, social life. The self was an atomistic unit, and as such was the fundamental building-block from which a theory of society could be constructed (Taylor, 1979/1985: 187–210).

There are good reasons to question these conclusions. It is far from clear what an *a priori* self might be. What we are ‘in ourselves’ is impossible to determine for the simple reason that we can come to think of ourselves *as our selves* only through interaction with others. This must be so since a ‘self’ is an entity radically different from all other entities in the world. The self is inherently reflexive; the self is ‘present to itself’ in a way nothing else is. As a number of sociologists have argued, such a reflexive self is first created through a process of social communication (Mead, 1932/1964: 144–64). We can develop a sense of self only as we come to see our selves as others do, and once we learn to take the point of view of the ‘generalized other’. We need others to describe us as persons of a certain kind; people who continuously can recognize us under a certain description. Only if described, and if recognized, in this manner will we be able to keep our selves stable as we move between different spatial and temporal contexts (Pizzorno, 1986: 367).

If we accept some version of this sociological argument and return to Hobbes’s state of nature, we can conclude that what an individual gains by recognizing another person in the state of nature is not utility, but instead — and much more fundamentally — the possibility of gaining utility. When someone is recognized, that someone obtains an identity, a standard by which interests can be measured, and when others recognize us, we obtain



the same thing. It is only as recognized that we can come to exist as persons, and only once we have come to exist as persons that notions regarding preferences and utilities can be attached to us (Axelrod, 1984: 150–4). We need others not because of the profit we derive from them, but because without them we would not be able to think of ourselves as ‘selves’ in the first place (Pizzorno, 1991: 218–20). Rationalistic calculations cannot enter into a decision to recognize someone in the state of nature since mutual recognition is a precondition for rational calculations to be possible in the first place.

An important corollary of this argument is that utilitarian considerations cannot determine how we think about ourselves. It is no doubt rational to say ‘I would like to study physics’, or ‘I would like to learn how to play the violin’, since these are desires that can belong to a set of preferences which we rationally can hold. When we want to attain these goals we can act unilaterally and do what it takes to reach them; we can work towards them and still be us. It is *not* rational, however, to say ‘I want to become a great physicist’ or ‘I want to become a famous violinist’. These are not rational preferences, but daydreams that for their fulfilment ultimately depend not on our own efforts, but on the status conferred on us by others.

Slightly differently put: the desire for recognition puts an end to the infinite regress implied by Hobbes, where every desire is but a means to another desire (Smith, 1988: 117). This is so since the desire for recognition is a desire unlike all others. To desire recognition is not to desire an object that provides utility, pleasure or profit, but instead to desire to be a *subject* of a certain kind. The desire for recognition is the core human desire, central to our sense of who and what we are. Hobbes was wrong: the self is a relational, not an atomistic concept, and self-preservation properly speaking — the preservation of the recognition that we are granted by others — is possible only in society, not in a state of nature (Pizzorno, 1993).

### The Recognition Game

During the last 30 years, game theory and various related approaches have become influential tools of analysis within the social sciences. Unfortunately the spectacular success of this rationalistic research programme has made many social scientists blind to the simple fact that people generally do not play games in order to win things. Outside of the world of game theory most games offer no or only symbolic prizes to their winners. Given the costs involved in the playing of many games, and given the odds against us, it is difficult to explain game playing in rationalistic terms (Smith, 1759/ 1974: 50; Fukuyama, 1992: 223–4; Huizinga, 1938/1988: 104–5). From a utilitarian perspective, games are only rarely worth their candles.

Why, then, if not for rationalistic reasons, do people play? Although probably no completely satisfactory answer can be given to this question, it is worth underlining the obvious, yet easily neglected, fact that people participate in games because they want to excel over others (Huizinga, 1938/1988: 90–1). Winning *as such* is the important part, not whatever additional rewards winning may bring. Even if we cannot all win, however, just



participating in a game is often important enough. By participating we can assume a certain role, abide by a certain set of rules, and by acting out this role and by abiding by these rules, others are able to identify us as persons of a certain kind (Mead, 1932/64:152–63). In these respects, games are similar to rituals through which our allegiance to a certain identity is affirmed (Turner, 1974; Moore and Myerhoff, 1977). People who perform certain movements in certain times and places — Muslims at daily prayers, football fans at a Sunday game, citizens singing a national anthem — appear together with, and before, others in a certain capacity. As such, they can be publicly recognized as the kinds of persons they privately only can hope to become.

Thus understood, many games do not typically concern what we can win or lose, but instead who or what we can be. Perhaps we could call such games ‘recognition games’. If we accept the framework of a state-of-nature thought experiment, but if we reject Hobbes’s atomistic conception of the self, the first game in which human beings engaged in the state of nature must have been a recognition game and not a prisoner’s dilemma. It could not have concerned the satisfaction of interests, but must instead have concerned the recognition of identities.

Incidentally, this is precisely G. W. F. Hegel’s interpretation of life in the state of nature as a ‘struggle for recognition’ (Hegel, 1807/1977: 111–19; Kojève, 1947/1980: 11–12). As Hegel argued, in order to make a distinction between himself and nature — in order to become a *human* being — man needed confirmation of who he was. To this end, his own view of himself could never be enough, since his self-description may be too fanciful, too demanding or simply false. In order to gain certainty about his identity, man had to come to exist not only for himself, but also for others. That is, he had to impose his description of himself on others and make them accept it as a valid account (Kojève, 1947/1980: 12–13). Since recognition never will be automatically forthcoming, however, each person has to fight for who he or she takes him- or herself to be. In this way, Hegel’s state of nature, just like Hobbes’s, will come to be characterized by a state of war. Yet, while also this *bellum omnium contra omnes* concerns self-preservation, it does so in an entirely different sense than that intended by Hobbes. The struggle concerns not the distribution of utilities, but instead who should have the right to impose what description on whom. This is how the master is separated from the slave, the superior being from the inferior.

Yet, as Hegel went on to argue, these identities are only temporary. In the long run the master will not be satisfied with the kind of recognition that the slave can grant him. The slave is only a slave after all and what the master wants is not just respect, but respect given by someone he in turn respects. Failing this, once he has beaten the slave into submission, the master will start to lose his energy and resolve. The slave is of course also dissatisfied with this outcome. He resents his inferior position, and while he does not dare to rebel, what he can do is to prove himself by educating himself and by transforming the world around him through the force of his own labour. As a result of this process of self-transformation and growth, the slave will one day become equal to the master, and when this happens the



MATRIX 2  
The Recognition Game

<i>A/B</i>	<b>recognized</b>	<b>non-recognized</b>
<b>recognized</b>	peace	‘master’
<b>non-recognized</b>	‘slave’	war

master will realize that the slave has become the person whose respect he long has sought. This state of mutual recognition granted by equal parties is both stable and final, and once it is reached relations between men will be characterized by cooperation and trust.

The concept of recognition is not merely a philosophical one, it has numerous political and social applications (Taylor, 1992: 25–73; Honneth, 1992, 1995). For example, the extent to which recognition is granted or withheld corresponds to radically different kinds of world politics. Consider Matrix 2, where Hegel’s recognition game is divided into four different stages (again the outcome is seen from the point of view of player *A*). In the initial position of mutual non-recognition, the participants refuse to acknowledge each other’s existence and naturally this creates a hostility of an especially intense kind. The problem is not only, as an interest-based explanation would have it, that the other party poses a threat to me or that I would derive benefits from doing him in. Instead his existence is unacceptable on the grounds that he lays claims to my identity. If I, not he, am to be me, then he must first be annihilated. As a political example, consider cases in which two states — South and North Korea, say, or South and North Vietnam — claim sovereignty over the same territory, or cases where a civil war is fought between two groups representing different interpretations of the nation.

A situation of mutual non-recognition is always unstable. One way in which it could end is through the demise of one of the combatants — the way South Vietnam was swallowed up by the North, or East Germany by West Germany. Barring such a dramatic end, a solution can also come about if one party decides to give in to the other’s claim to superiority. Consider first the situation in which one of the parties, *A*, is not recognized under its own description, while it has to recognize *B*. Here *A* is the inferior party whose claim to an identity goes unacknowledged. Following Hegel, however, *A* can improve its lot by developing itself and its skills. In sociological terms this is the situation of the self-conscious outsider or social upstart who tries to conform as closely as ever possible to the rules which govern



life in a certain social setting. By conforming to the rules he makes it possible for others to recognize him as the kind of person to whom these rules apply. A recent political example we find in the way in which Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have tried their best to 'behave' in order to improve their standing in the eyes of the European Union.

Consider next the mirror situation where *A* is recognized by *B* under its own description, while *B* can be described in whatever terms *A* likes. Here *A* is the superior party who can determine, and enforce, the rules of the game. Although this situation may appear as advantageous from *A*'s perspective, it is, again following Hegel, not so in the long run. While *A* will reap disproportionate benefits from its superiority, the recognition it is given will be useless, since it is provided by an inferior. Lacking a true sign of respect, *A* will start to deteriorate. Perhaps this perspective can help us establish an alternative, non-rationalistic, theory of what sometimes is referred to as 'hegemonic decline' (Gilpin, 1981: 168–75, 234; Keohane, 1984: 32–41). A hegemonic power — if it is too superior — will over time lose the impetus to improve its economic, political or social performance, not because it is 'exploited' by its inferiors, but because it fails to respect them (cf. Olson and Zeckhauser, 1966).

The logic of the interaction between the players will sooner or later bring the game to an end. The players will either eliminate one another or grant one another recognition on their own preferred terms. If and when this latter outcome is reached, both parties greet it as a satisfactory outcome. It is an improvement for the previously inferior player who now finally manages to establish himself as an equal partner, but it is also an improvement for the previously superior player who now finally gets the respect he craves. A situation of mutual recognition is hence a stable outcome that need not be changed. We know who we are and what we are worth. A political example can be found in the *post-bellum* community that emerged in Europe at the end of the Napoleonic wars, or in the *post-bellum* community created in Western Europe after the Second World War. In both cases, the outcome was mutual recognition and long periods of extensive cooperation between previous enemies (cf. Miller 1994: 327–48).

### **Soviet Russia Against the West**

This alternative logic of world politics can serve as a foundation for an alternative interpretation of the relations between Soviet Russia and the West. To wit, the confrontation between capitalism and Communism, democracy and dictatorship, the arms race and the threat of nuclear annihilation, were not primarily the consequences of mutually incompatible interests, but instead the results of mutually incompatible descriptions of self and other. Throughout most of this century, Soviet Russia was the unrecognized party and the West — and after the Second World War, notably the United States — the recognized party. During the entire era, the Soviet state had to fight to be accepted. In the 1920s, the Bolsheviks



sought recognition as a 'legitimate state', under Stalin recognition as a 'great power', during the Cold War the position of a 'superpower', and during the Gorbachev era to be acknowledged as a regular inhabitant of the 'Common House of Europe'.

If we are to understand Soviet foreign policy — and if we are to understand the interaction between the superpowers — it is this struggle for recognition on the part of the Soviet leaders we must study. While this alternative logic does not explain all features of world politics, and not all aspects of Russia's relations to the West, it does explain some of the more important aspects of the relationship — and in a more convincing manner than traditional, rationalistic, approaches.

### *Recognizing Soviet Russia as a 'Legitimate State'*

After the revolution in 1917, the Soviet state was treated as an international pariah (Ringmar, 1996b; Francis, 1921/1970; Uldricks, 1979; Debo, 1992). In the opinion of Western statesmen, diplomatic recognition could not be granted a regime that was founded on principles antithetical to Western values. This rejection was translated into military form as England, France and the United States intervened on the side of the Whites in the Russian civil war. The hostility of the West was matched only by the defiance of the Bolshevik leaders who preached world revolution and who refused to have anything to do with the capitalist representatives of the old world order. When Leon Trotsky went to Brest-Litovsk in December 1917, he did not really negotiate with the Germans but instead used the occasion as a chance to speak 'to the Workers, the Oppressed and the Bled peoples of Europe' (Fischer, 1930/1951: 32). It was the Bolsheviks' firm belief that a new world was about to be inaugurated; a world in which social classes would be abolished together with states, foreign ministries and foreign policy (von Laue, 1963: 235).

Only a few years later, however, everything looked quite different. As soon as the war against the Whites had been won, the Bolsheviks seemed interested in some form of *rapprochement*, and the Western leaders, for their part, were ready to meet them halfway. Trade negotiations and negotiations on outstanding debts were initiated and the Soviet leaders even accepted an invitation to participate in an international conference in Genoa in April 1922. When they arrived in Italy, the Bolshevik delegates were not wearing their old revolutionary uniforms, but instead the frock coats and striped trousers of the traditional international diplomat (von Laue, 1963: 24; Trotsky, 1937/1972: 140; Orwell, 1945/1987: 90; White, 1985). Although no general agreement was reached in Genoa, the Bolsheviks used the occasion to conclude a separate treaty with Germany at Rapallo (Fischer, 1930/1951: 318–54; Rosenbaum, 1965: 1–47). From this time onwards, relations between the Bolshevik state and the West were gradually normalized. One state after another granted the Soviet Union diplomatic recognition — Fascist Italy in 1923; England, Holland, France and the Scandinavian countries a year later — and a number of commercial treaties



and agreements on outstanding debts were concluded (Fischer, 1930/1951: 468, 502).

Realist scholars who have studied this transformation see it as a perfect example of the impact of the anarchical structure on the preferences and behaviour of individual states (Waltz, 1979/1986: 128–9). The Bolsheviks wanted a world revolution, but once they had seized power they were compelled to abide by the rules of *Realpolitik*; they had to do what states have to do or they would have risked their own destruction. The Soviet national interest dictated that they form alliances with other states and for this reason they had to give up their plans for a world revolution. The Western states, for their part, gradually came to realize that the Bolsheviks could be relied on as partners in traditional political deals, and that, besides, there was money to be made in economic transactions with the Communist government.

However, there are a number of facts that a realist explanation either cannot account for or which it conveniently ignores. While it is obvious that military security was foremost on every Soviet leaders' mind throughout the civil war, an interest-based account can neither explain the ferocity of the conflict nor why it came to involve Western powers. Yet as the alternative perspective allows us to see, the Russian civil war did not primarily concern who should get what, but instead *who should be who*. The Bolsheviks and the West described self and other in radically incompatible terms. The result was a struggle for recognition. As the West saw it, the Red government in Moscow had to be replaced by the White, and as the Soviets saw it, capitalism had to be replaced by the dictatorship of the proletariat.

An interest-based account is equally unable to explain the rationale behind the Bolsheviks' diplomatic activities after 1921. The problem for the realists is that the Bolsheviks' conformism went far beyond what any military requirements would stipulate. They cared too much about how they appeared to others and how they were received. Their primary concern was to be regarded as a 'legitimate state' and to be treated with respect. To this end they had to make sure that they followed all the relevant rules that pertained to states. It was *social*, not physical, insecurity which made their delegates put on frock coats and striped trousers and turned them into 'sticklers for diplomatic etiquette' (von Laue, 1963: 240).

Although interest-based accounts describe a complete shift in Soviet foreign policy after 1922, it is not true that the world revolution ended in that year (von Laue, 1963). From this time onwards, the Bolsheviks instead conducted two foreign policies, each containing a different self-description, a different description of the West, and two different sets of interests. The first policy was handled by the Commissariat on Foreign Affairs and it described the Soviet Union as a legitimate, normal, state among others and the West as an acceptable counterpart 'in the present historical period' (von Laue, 1963: 262). This is the Soviet Union that showed up in Genoa. The second policy was handled by Comintern and it described the Bolsheviks as the vanguard of the proletariat and the West as the soon-to-fall last bastion of capitalism. This is the Soviet Union that continued to foment revolutions wherever the conditions made it possible. For this country, the relevant



circle of recognition did not consist of other states, but instead of the international working-class movement.

Before Stalin took over in the late 1920s, Comintern was the more influential of the two institutions, and the revolutionary policy more important than the conformist (von Laue, 1963: 236–46). Diplomacy became a cover for revolutionary activities, or simply a way to stay on good terms with capitalist states while waiting for the revolution to come. Whenever the working-class in a capitalist country seemed about to rebel, however, the Soviet leaders were quick to shed their diplomatic pretensions (Fischer, 1930/1951; von Laue, 1963: 273–4). Ultimately, the diplomatic line did of course prevail, but the realists are wrong in assuming that this was due to the imperatives of power politics. Instead the crucial factor was the fact that the world revolution never happened. As it became obvious that the international working-class failed to recognize them as their leaders, it became increasingly difficult for the Soviet leaders to lay claims to this status. The only alternative was to become a ‘legitimate state’, and while this was not their preferred option, it at least served to motivate the Bolsheviks’ continued hold on power.

### *Recognizing Soviet Russia as a ‘Great Power’*

In the years after the Revolution, it was quite impossible for Bolshevik leaders to imagine that an organization made up of capitalist states could be anything but hostile to them. Once the revolutionary foreign policy had been replaced by diplomacy, however, it became increasingly important to participate in international fora (Fischer, 1930: 774; Ringmar, 1996b). The decisive shift came after the Nazi take-over in Germany in the spring of 1933. Hitler was bent on redrawing the map of Europe, and faced with this radical challenge the Soviet leaders increasingly came to associate themselves with the existing world order. The Soviet Union concluded a military pact with France and Czechoslovakia and in the spring of 1934 they joined the League of Nations (League of Nations, 1934: 17–24; Plettenberg, 1983; Haigh et al., 1986: 39–50).

Once a member, Soviet delegates took an active part in the proceedings and the Soviet leaders strongly defended the notion of collective security. By this stage, however, France and England were themselves in various ways trying to move away from the *status quo* order symbolized by Versailles. The idea was to give Germany a larger role in the European security system and in this way to contain Hitler’s *revanchism*. For their part, the Soviets were highly suspicious of any such moves, fearing an anti-Communist alliance between France, England and Nazi Germany (Degras, 1953: 170–8). Strange as it may seem, by the mid-1930s the Soviet Union had become the staunchest defender of the principles of Versailles.

The 1930s in Russia was a time of hardening dictatorship, but also a time of relative economic recovery. As Stalin strengthened his position, he increasingly came to define his country as a ‘great power’ equal to England and France, and with a sphere of interest of its own in Eastern Europe (Erickson, 1962: 475–7). With this aim in mind, negotiations for a pact



arrangement in Eastern Europe were initiated with France in 1935, but Stalin quickly pulled out when he realized that the French were reluctant to see his country in this new and elevated position (*International Affairs*, 1963; Radice, 1981). Despite this fact, negotiations with the West continued, and in the spring of 1939 a political agreement was reached regarding an anti-Nazi coalition (Roberts, 1995: 85–6). When this agreement was to be followed up with a military agreement, however, negotiations once again stalled (Jabara Carley, 1993; Strang, 1981; *International Affairs*, 1990). Again the Western powers refused to grant the Soviet Union special privileges in Eastern Europe. Instead, Stalin turned to Hitler, who was more than willing to satisfy his wishes on condition that Germany too be given a sphere of influence in the east (Roberts, 1995: 69–91).

According to the traditional, interest-based, view, the events that led up to the Second World War are examples of balance of power politics in perhaps its purest form (Taylor, 1964; Adamthwaite, 1984; Martel, 1986). After 1933, Hitler's virulent anti-Communism made the Soviet Union turn to the Western camp in order to safeguard its security and in order to prevent the formation of a unified, capitalist, front. When French and English concessions to Germany appeared to make such a front more likely, Stalin instead turned to Hitler.

As we might expect, an identity-based explanation of the same events puts the emphases quite differently. The decision to join the League of Nations and the decision to make an agreement with France cannot be explained in terms of a search for security, since it resulted in no credible military guarantees (Roberts, 1995: 18). Instead, both moves were attempts by Stalin to gain recognition for the new identity he had fashioned for his country. As Stalin saw it in 1934, it was only in a stable political system that the Soviet Union could establish itself as a 'great power'. This is why Stalin supported the *status quo* order and why his delegates at the League of Nations made such efforts to abide by the stipulations of international law.

It was only when the Western powers refused to recognize a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe that Stalin turned to Hitler. Yet this sudden and radical shift cannot be explained as an attempt to provide military security for the Soviet Union. On the contrary, a war could very well have been avoided if only an alliance had been concluded between Moscow and the West. This agreement did not materialize, however, since Stalin wanted more than security — a new and more elevated status for his country. The Western powers were too suspicious of Stalin's intentions and Stalin was too sensitive on the subject to bear the rejection (Roberts, 1995: 95). The negotiations that took place in August 1939 illustrate well these two facts. According to Stalin, the Anglo-French delegation took too long to arrive in Moscow, since they travelled by boat and not by plane; they were of too low a rank and seemed to lack the authority to conclude a deal (Taylor, 1964: 318; Manne, 1991: 94–5; Roberts, 1995: 86–7). Stalin felt humiliated on his own behalf and on behalf of his country.

According to this alternative interpretation it was thus neither Hitler's aggressiveness nor the miscalculated appeasement policy of England and France that set Europe on the path to the Second World War, but instead



Stalin's redefinition of his country as a 'great power' and the different responses this provoked in the Western powers and in Germany. This is *not* to say that Hitler was not aggressive, and there is no doubt that this aggressiveness sooner or later would have started *some other war* than the Second World War. Similarly, it is *not* to say that the appeasement policy was not a mistake. The biggest mistake that France and England committed in the summer of 1939, however, was not to recognize the Soviet Union as a great power.

*Recognizing Soviet Russia as a 'Superpower'*

The Soviet state that emerged after the war was an entirely different entity from that which had gone into it. When fighting finally ceased, half of Europe was overrun by Russian troops and pro-Soviet regimes were soon installed throughout eastern and central parts of the continent. This time no one was going to ignore the Soviet Union. At the Yalta and Potsdam conferences the supremacy of the Soviet Union in its own sphere of influence was *de facto* recognized by the Western Allies. At Yalta the Soviet Union was also granted a permanent seat in the Security Council of the United Nations, an explicit institutionalization of its 'great power' status. There is no doubt that these agreements could have laid a foundation for a stable *post-bellum* community similar to the one that emerged in Europe after the Napoleonic wars. Instead, however, the outcome was the Cold War.

There are two traditional explanations for the origin of the Cold War (Stover, 1972; Gaddis, 1983; *Diplomatic History*, 1993: 251–310; Eden, 1993). The first puts the blame on the aggressiveness and expansionism of the Soviet Union (Schlesinger, 1967: 22–52; Feis, 1970; Ulam, 1971; Mastny, 1979). Despite Stalin's promises to hold elections in the Soviet-occupied parts of Eastern Europe, Western-style democracy was never introduced. Instead, Stalin's intentions were revealed through the *coup* in Prague, the crackdown on protesters in Berlin and the Communist take-over in China. According to the revisionist — but by now equally traditional — explanation, the blame should instead be put on the neo-imperialist ambitions of the United States (Williams, 1959/1991; Fleming, 1961; Kolko and Kolko, 1968; Hess, 1988: 483–99). The dropping of the atomic bomb was not only intended as a way to bring a swift end to the war, but also — and perhaps primarily — as a signal to Moscow. Further, and more explicitly, threats were presented in the aggressive rhetoric of Truman, Churchill and other Western politicians as well as through the policy of containment that committed the United States to support anti-Communist activities anywhere in the world.

From an alternative perspective, both traditional explanations seem overly rationalistic. Both see the actions of the Soviet Union as guided by the interests of the state, and they differ only in what they take these interests to require — expansion or protection. According to an identity-based explanation, however, what the Soviet Union sought was primarily neither expansion nor protection, but instead recognition as a country equal to the undisputed leader, that is, the United States. In the opinion of



the Soviets, they had earned their position of parity with the United States through the war and to deny them this status was to insult the socialist camp and those who had died in its defence.

Instead of being secure in the great power status granted his country, Stalin became the leader of an insecure superpower wanna-be. Sensitive to the slightest humiliation, Stalin sought to avoid any occasion that would emphasize the relative inferiority of his country and the supremacy of the capitalist enemy. This explains the Soviet reluctance to join the United States led program for economic reconstruction after the war (James and James, 1994, 615–22; Roberts, 1995). The Soviets had participated at Bretton-Woods and as late as in December 1945 they still acknowledged that it would be in their interest to ratify the agreement, yet at the last moment Stalin backed down (James and James, 1994: 615–22). He was evidently reluctant to participate in an international forum dominated by the Americans and where the USSR inevitably would look weak. Instead, the Soviet quest for parity with the US continued. To this end they needed an atomic bomb — which they got in August 1949 — a space programme — that was launched with the Sputnik in October 1957 — and a nuclear weapons arsenal — that was put into place in the 1960s and 1970s (Killian, 1976; McDougall, 1985).

According to the traditional explanation of the arms race, the investment in nuclear weapons was a rational way to gain security (Russett, 1983: 541–68). For the same reason it made sense to acquire foreign allies and military bases around the globe. From the alternative, identity-based perspective, however, such an explanation can only make sense for some of the period and some of the developments. It could perhaps apply to the immediate post-war period when the US had a monopoly on nuclear weapons, but it cannot explain why the Soviet Union continued to arm itself once it had obtained a nuclear second-strike capability in the 1960s. There was no need to plan for more than a second strike and any armaments beyond this point could thus serve no feasible military purpose.

Instead, it was always the symbolic value of the nuclear weapons that really mattered (Jervis, 1987; Rosenberg, 1983: 3–71). The superpowers armed themselves for the simple reason that nuclear armaments were what defined a superpower as such. If you wanted to be recognized in this capacity this was what you had to do. The arms race — in its final, total and symbolic, version — was not a utility-driven game, but instead a game of ‘pure prestige’ — the two superpowers sought to impress each other and the world through the destruction of their own resources (Huizinga, 1938/1988: 104–5). The competition did not primarily concern ‘mutually assured destruction’ (MAD), but rather what perhaps could be called ‘mutually assured recognition’ (MAR, for short).

A similar conclusion applies to the other Soviet obsessions. The space programme, the wish to ‘over-take the United States’ economically, and the construction of a global system of allies cannot purely be explained in terms of the imperatives of national security. To say that these pursuits were non-rational, however, is *not* to say that they were mistaken (Schelling, 1966: 36–43). Such a conclusion can only be reached if we hold on to the erro-



neous belief that all actions necessarily are undertaken in pursuit of self-interest. The Soviet obsession with 'racing' the United States — including competitions in the Olympic games and in international chess tournaments — had little to do with what they could win, but everything to do with what they could *be* (Hazan, 1982). The Soviet leaders wanted to show off in front of the world; they wanted to excel and by excelling come to be recognized as equal or superior to the Americans.

Despite these intense efforts, however, the new self that the Russians sought to construct was never particularly secure. The countries of Eastern Europe, and an increasing number of 'socialist' countries in the Third World, did of course constitute a reasonably dependable circle of recognition (Carrère d'Encausse, 1987: 279–379). Yet, since the Soviet leaders never respected any of these states, the recognition they granted could never be enough. What the Russian leaders sought was not just respect, but respect granted by the United States, the one country they themselves respected. The Cold War politics of the 1950s, and the ups and downs of *détente* throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, are best explained as results of the degree to which this recognition was granted or withheld (Garthoff, 1985; Crockatt and Smith, 1987; von Oudenaren, 1991). When the superpower status of the Soviet Union clearly was confirmed — most obviously perhaps in the 'summit meetings' of the Breshnev era — tensions abated, and when this status was questioned — as when the US Congress tied arms limitations to improvements in the Soviet human rights record — tensions, and armaments, immediately rose (Sakharov, 1992: 394, 402–3).

*Recognizing Soviet Russia as an inhabitant of the 'Common House of Europe'*

Once Mikhail Gorbachev had come to power in 1985, a new set of stories began to be told about the Soviet state. The Soviet Union and the West were no longer just 'co-existing at the present stage of development', instead they were 'partners' who had to cooperate in order to find 'solutions to the problems of mankind' (Bialer and Afferica, 1986: 609–45; Gorbachev, 1988: 190–209; Meyer, 1988: 124–63; Checkel, 1993: 271–300). Soon the old set of confrontational metaphors was replaced by a more peaceful set. 'Opposing blocks' became 'shared agendas', 'national interests' became 'common interests', and the notion that the Soviet Union was a 'superpower' was increasingly replaced by the notion that the Soviet Union was an inhabitant of a building referred to by the Soviet leaders as the 'Common House of Europe' (Niqueux, 1990: 121–3; Malcolm, 1991; Chilton and Ilyin, 1993: 7–31). Defined in this new fashion, the Soviet state came to embrace a new set of interests (Kull, 1992: 131–57; Pravda, 1992).

Why, then, did Gorbachev reformulate Russia's definition of itself? From a rationalistic perspective the explanation is not difficult to find (Sestanovich, 1994). It was a result of the disastrous state of the Soviet economy and the repercussions this had on the country's military capability (Veen, 1987; Åslund, 1989: 10–22). Economic reforms were necessary in



order to improve the welfare of the population, but, more importantly, in order to safeguard the foundation of the Soviet nuclear deterrent. In the long run only a viable economic and technological base could guarantee the country's physical survival. In the short run, the question was how to reply to the challenges posed by the high-tech weapons systems developed by the Reagan administration. Gorbachev did what the interest of his country demanded, but the forces unleashed by the reforms soon broke the country apart.

As the alternative perspective makes clear, however, social rather than physical survival was the primary concern. The Russian people did not, after all, live in absolute, but in relative poverty. While their living standard was quite high in terms of well-being, it was always considerably lower than that of the capitalist countries in the West. Naturally, this was a great source of embarrassment to the advocates of the Communist — and supposedly superior — system, but the embarrassment arose out of a comparison with the West and not as a result of the Soviet economic achievement as such. People can accept much worse economic conditions than those in which the people of the Soviet Union lived only if they are ignorant of the economic conditions of others. The people of the Soviet Union were not ignorant of course — in fact, they vastly exaggerated the living standard of people in the West — and this, rather than the actual performance of the system, led to pressure for reform.

Despite the relative backwardness of the Soviet economy, the country was always able to pay for its nuclear deterrent. Nuclear weapons, after all, are cheap. In fact, the military sphere was the only one in which the Soviet Union managed to maintain a rough parity with the United States. The problem was instead that a nuclear second-strike capability no longer sufficed to qualify a state as a 'superpower'. In the 1980s, the terms of international competition had changed. Wealth and power increasingly came to be created through new technologies, decentralized and more flexible administrative techniques, and through the ability to manipulate symbols rather than things (Fukuyama, 1992: 254–65; Reddaway, 1991: 53–9. *International Organization*, 1994). The most striking example of this transformation is perhaps Reagan's Star Wars programme that acquired an enormous symbolic power despite its limited military applications (Ungar, 1991).

Faced with these formidable and quite unexpected challenges a new generation of Soviet leaders realized that they had to redefine their role in the world. The country had become an 'Upper Volta with nuclear weapons', earning more scorn than respect (Neumann, 1996: 187–9). If nothing but physical survival had been at stake here, the Soviet leaders could no doubt have ignored this shift; they could have continued to be one of the two militarily most powerful countries in the world, while leaving it to the United States to be the richest and most popular. Yet the competition between Americans and Russians never concerned mere military matters. The Russians wanted the respect of the world, and when the West started changing, the Russians had to follow. The consequence was Gorbachev's reforms and, ultimately, the fall of the Communist system.



### Conclusion

In a radio broadcast on 1 October 1939, Winston Churchill famously referred to the Soviet Union as ‘a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma’ (Churchill, 1948: 449). Yet, as he went on to say, we can make some sense of the foreign policy of this amorphous entity if we simply study its ‘national interest’. If we assume that the Soviet leaders act rationally we can examine the threats they face, their range of options, and in this way reconstruct the utilities they attach to different outcomes (Allison, 1971: 32–5; Rubinstein, 1989: 12–13). Yet the rhetorical flair of Churchill’s phrase hides the fundamental flaw in the logic of his reasoning. Interests — ‘national’ or other — are never *a priori* given, but always connected to a *someone* for whom they are interests. It follows that we cannot know what someone’s interests are unless we know who that someone is. As the brief overview of relations between Soviet Russia and the West has made clear, what Russia is has never been obvious neither to its leaders nor to outside observers. *Ergo*: before we can say anything about Russia’s interests, we must analyse the processes through which the country’s identity is formed.

To assume with Churchill that questions of interests can be understood apart from questions of identities is to assume that world politics is a game played by players without faces. In such a game only the position of a country matters, not its name. All we need to know is how a country is measured on a few material indicators of power, not what a country aims to do with the power it has. Consequently, the position that presently is occupied by Russia could just as well be occupied by any other player fitting the same material description. Yet this conclusion is false. As the historical overview has demonstrated, the fact that Russia is *Russia* and not some other country makes all the difference in the world. The self-description of the Soviet leaders was a radical alternative to the self-descriptions of the countries of the West, yet even this description needed to be recognized before it could be securely established. This paradox created a tension that profoundly influenced Soviet Russia’s interaction with the West. This explains why the early Bolshevik regime oscillated between confrontation and conformism to diplomatic rules; why Stalin struck the deal with Hitler which was to bring about the Second World War; why the nuclear arms race went on far beyond the levels needed for physical security; and why the Communist system eventually collapsed. None of these events can be properly explained with the help of rationalistic theories.

Two remarks remain to be made — one encouraging and one more pessimistic. The encouraging conclusion is that the West has much more influence over a future Russian identity than is commonly assumed. The West cannot tell Russia what to be, of course, but what the West can do is to use its power to grant or withhold recognition for the self-descriptions that the Russians themselves come up with. This power is considerable and as all power it must be used with caution and responsibility. *We* have to make up *our* minds which kind of a Russia we want and then grant that Russia our full recognition as soon as we are given a chance.

The pessimistic conclusion is that rationalism will continue to prevail in



the study of international politics. As a result, we will continue to commit the Churchillian fallacy of putting questions concerning interests before questions concerning identities. In the social realm — including the realm of world politics — such analytical mistakes can be disastrous, since interpretations quickly become self-fulfilling prophecies. When we act upon an interpretation, a certain world takes shape and, before we know it, our interpretation is expressed both in new political institutions and in new military hardware. For this reason alone we must look for alternative ways of interpreting the relationship between Russia and the West, or, for that matter, the relationship between states in general. Only by breaking the rationalists' monopoly on interpretation can we avoid repeating our old political mistakes. In the end, the difference between interpretation and policy is not particularly large, while the difference between one policy and another may be the difference between peace and war.

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